

Gender-based violence in primary schools: Jamaica

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The world will be a better place as a result of the overarching contribution of these critical stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) refers to “acts of sexual, physical, or psychological violence inflicted on children in and around schools because of stereotypes and roles or norms attributed to or expected of them because of their sex or gendered identity. It also refers to the differences between girls’ and boys’ experience of and vulnerabilities to violence” (Greene et al. 2013, 5).

A recent report published by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) expressed significant concerns about the protective environment that the Jamaican state has created to reduce children’s vulnerability to violence (CAPRI and UNICEF 2018). It further states that 68 of every 100,000 Jamaican children are victims of violence, even in spaces that should be safe—one of which is school.

A traditional focus on secondary-school youth

A recent policy brief, “Whole School Programme to Address Gender Based Violence among Young Jamaicans” (CVC 2016), cited data from the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF) indicating that, in 2014, 323 persons aged 13–17 years were raped, 287 were assaulted, and 267 were victims of other sexual offenses. More-specific JCF statistics on gender-based violence (GBV) show that, as of September 2016, 614 rapes of females occurring in 2015 had been reported (JCF, 2016). Over time, deliberate efforts have been made to implement a raft of interventions ¹at the secondary level to mitigate the impact of SRGBV.

Additionally, according to the 2008 Jamaica Reproductive Health Survey, approximately 20.3 percent of young women of secondary-school age (15–19 years) reported having been forced to have sexual intercourse at some point during their lives (Serbanescu, Ruiz, and Suchdev 2010). Such a finding has a high probable correlation to teenage pregnancy. In 2015, 59 out of every 1,000 adolescent girls in

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¹ Existing Interventions include the Safe Schools Programme, Health and Family Life Education Programme, School Wide Positive Behaviour Intervention, and the Support Framework and Child Friendly Schools initiatives. These are explained further in the subsequent section.

Jamaica became teen mothers compared with a regional and global average of 64 and 47 adolescent girls, respectively (World Bank, 2017; Kennedy 2017). These early, unintended pregnancies place adolescent girls at increased risk of having their educations disrupted and even curtailed. These young women also may have experienced GBV from an early age (Peart 2019).

GBV is not removed from the context of Jamaica's school system. In fact, school-age boys and girls have had their share of encounters with sexual, psychological, emotional, and verbal abuse. The situation is perpetuated in formalized systems such as the education system because it is one of the largest formal systems that requires the interaction of both genders. Specific interventions have been geared toward achieving gender equity and resocialization of students to enable boys and girls to coexist in a peaceful and nonthreatening manner. Several national initiatives and programs to ensure school safety and security—including a violence prevention program, a national safe school program, and a behavior modification program—have been implemented in a bid to provide a socially responsive environment at both the school and community levels.

However, even with all these initiatives and interventions, the constant focus has been on the secondary level. With the advancement of technology and unabated access to information, the need to scale interventions at the primary level is now also necessary. This level of the education system is often overlooked and should be addressed in light of the need for evidence-based policy directives.

Limited interventions at the primary level

At the primary school level, there have been fewer interventions. However, one effort that has recently expanded into Jamaican primary schools is the School-Wide Positive Behaviour Intervention and Support (SWPBIS) framework—a proactive, team-based initiative to create and sustain safe and effective schools by fostering a disciplined, structured environment to address challenges such as student violence (Linton 2018).

The assignment of guidance counselors to primary-level institutions is one of the initiatives underway to assist students with overcoming vocational, personal, and behavioral challenges. Guidance counselors are employed at larger primary schools with enrollments of 500 and above. In some instances, a guidance counselor serves a cluster of schools, in keeping with the 500-to-1 student-counselor ratio to ensure that students in schools with smaller enrollments also receive the requisite services. This arrangement, however, has not been sustainable, as it has often left many schools or students without the counseling and psychosocial support services needed to nurture students' development.

Further, only a limited number of primary-level institutions are assigned health and family life teachers, and none is assigned a dean of discipline. This means that the responsibilities for students' psychosocial and disciplinary needs fall mostly to the classroom teacher, who may not be prepared or have the technical capacity to deal with some aspects of students' social and psychological development. Truth be told, the focus on SRGBV at the primary level is less intense than at the secondary level, and hence these particular issues are not well researched—an information gap that does not augur well for the education system and for the country.

In 2017, Jamaica launched the National Strategic Action Plan to Eliminate Gender-Based Violence 2017–2027 (NSAP–GBV). The action plan assumes a multisectoral approach for tackling GBV (Patterson 2017). However, there is inadequate evidence-based data on GBV at the basic level of education in Jamaica. Traditionally, the voices of victims, often girls, have been silenced and policy considered without the proper context to protect the victims.

It is against this background that focus was given to obtaining and documenting girls' and boys' voices on gender-based violence in Jamaican primary schools, in the hope of informing further policy decisions—because the cost of inaction can be deleterious and far reaching.

COMMON STUDY BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger cross-country study of SRGBV in primary schools, including Jamaica, Kenya, Malawi, and Nigeria.² The “common study” held three specific research objectives:

- Establish the prevalence of and possible factors leading to SRGBV
- Determine country response options to the challenges posed by SRGBV
- Identify possible interventions toward minimizing SRGBV

The research applied a mixed methods design (Creswell 2013), including quantitative surveys, qualitative focus group discussions, and a desk review targeting primary school-age girls and boys (10–13 years) as well as educators in selected primary-level institutions, including guidance counselors, principals, and teachers.

For the Jamaican leg of the research, using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for determining sample size, a random sample of some 515 boys and girls from 16 primary-level institutions and some 100 educators and school leaders were selected to participate in the study. The research team or a teacher or guidance counselor facilitated 32 single-sex focus group discussions with boys and girls. All six educational regions or school districts participated in the study, with participants selected from 7 of 14 parishes. These regions included rural and urban or peri-urban sites.

KEY MESSAGES FROM THE COUNTRY SURVEY

The prevalence of sexual GBV among girls and boys in Jamaican primary schools is relatively low, but sexual harassment via social media has become prominent.

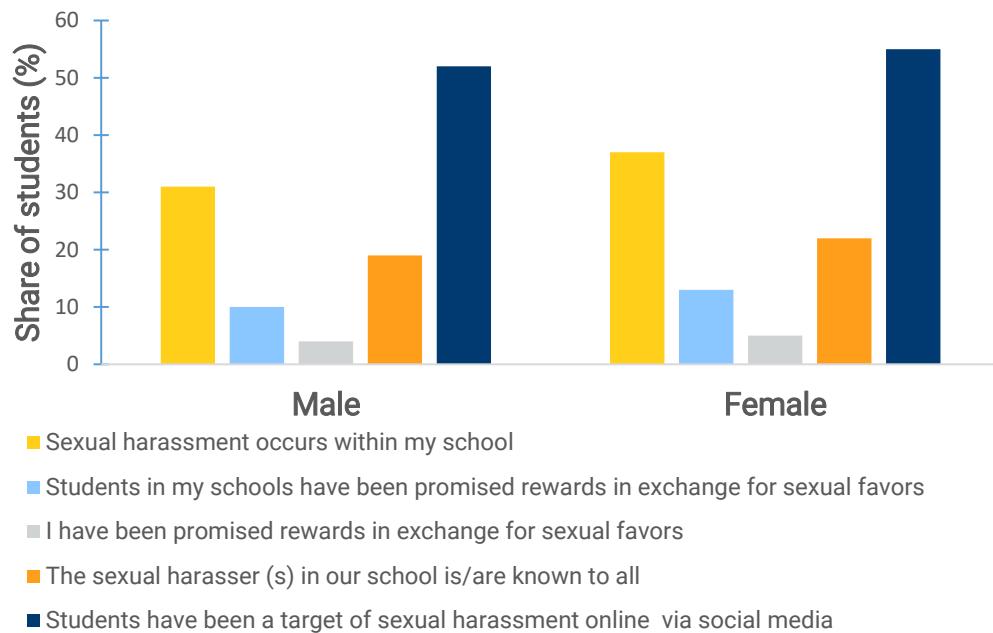
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² A policy brief synthesizing the cross-country findings is forthcoming, as is a country brief for Malawi. Nigeria and Kenya briefs are already available.

The research showed a low prevalence of sexual GBV among girls and boys in Jamaican primary schools, but girls are more vulnerable. Figure 1 outlines students' responses to statements about sexual harassment in their schools. Girls seem to be more vulnerable although the differential is not significantly wide. For example, the experience of being promised a reward in exchange for sexual favors shows a mere 1 percent differential in favor of girls. Further, the overall affirmative response to this statement totaled less than 10 percent: 4 percent of boys and 5 percent of girls indicated having been promised a reward for sexual favors (Figure 1).

The literature suggests that although GBV negatively affects both girls and boys, girls are particularly more vulnerable. Owing to their gender, girls are often forced to discontinue their schooling, which places them at a disadvantage for future income-generating opportunities. The impact is more pronounced when the girls become pregnant and trapped in a cycle of gross poverty and increased vulnerability to exploitation and social exclusion (Save the Children 2020).

Figure 1 Student-reported prevalence of sexual harassment in Jamaican primary Schools, by gender, 2020



Source: Author's computation from field survey, 2020.

Note: The sample included 515 primary school students, aged 10–16 years, from 16 primary schools; 3% of the sample had students 13-16 years-old.

Although the response to being promised a reward for sexual favors among boys and girls is low, students agreed more frequently that they have had unwelcome sexual comments made to or about them, have been shown sexually explicit pictures, have been touched in unwelcome sexual ways, or have been exposed to naked pictures or naked bodies and or forced to do something sexual. As a result, some students (60 percent) indicated feeling unsafe at school; lacking a sense of belonging (20 percent); feeling depressed (57 percent); feeling low self-esteem and low self-worth (51 percent); being generally fearful of interacting with others (41 percent); feeling frustration at school (69 percent); and feeling unable to concentrate on their studies (45 percent). These responses serve as further evidence to illustrate why actors should care about GBV among our primary school students. These effects can have a lasting impact on students' psychosocial well-being and academic outcomes (UNGEI and UNESCO 2013).

These findings show that, contrary to popular perceptions, preadolescent boys and girls (students aged 9–12 years) are equally subjected to SRGBV. Because GBV begins during preadolescence or pubescence, it becomes necessary that policy provisions be in place to address GBV at this early stage. Further, this study is not suggesting that special attention should not be paid to the plight of girls concerning GBV, as boys may be more open to reporting violence than girls. Also, the types of violence that girls experience may be more consequential than the types that boys experience.

Touching, teasing, and making jokes about sex are common forms of SRGBV, reported by 61.7 percent of the Jamaican primary school students surveyed. Bullying is also a major form of SRGBV—sometimes serving as a platform for sexual harassment. The study recorded some 162 incidences of gender-related bullying, representing 33 percent of the responses received.

However, older children (aged 13–16 years) are targeted more and seemed to have less confidence in their schools' ability to do something to stop sexual harassment, because initiatives to manage SRGBV have been quite limited in primary schools. The guidance counselors were of the view that their role should be supported at the

primary level by that of a Health and Family Life Educator who is better equipped to manage SRGBV-specific information. This finding also underscores the importance of preadolescence as an age to begin targeting anti-GBV work.

The study also suggests that technology is one of the main drivers of SRGBV. Online sexual harassment seems to be the most prevalent form, followed by sexual harassment in schools (as noted in Figure 1). Moreover, that around 20 percent of the students said the sexual harassers are “known to all” presents a grand opportunity for alternative action.

In conclusion, girls are more prone than boys to feel unsafe, to lack a sense of belonging, and to feel frustrated and unable to concentrate on studies. Boys are more likely than girls to feel depressed, to feel reduced self-worth and self-esteem, and to generally fear interacting with others. The literature in support of these findings indicates that girls are most at risk of GBV in and around schools, but boys may also be targeted. The experience, or even the threat, of SRGBV often results in poor performance, irregular attendance, dropout, truancy, and low self-esteem (UNGEI and UNESCO 2013).

SRGBV among primary school students remains rooted in gender attitudes toward sexualization of girls’ bodies

The close connection between SRGBV and sexualization of girls’ bodies, even as early as primary school, points to a bigger problem. For example, the findings from the study indicate that a major cause of SRGBV cited by girls (72 percent) and boys (79 percent) was girls wearing short and tight dresses. Also, girls who had reached puberty were particularly targeted because of their physical development, including breast size and physique.

A girl’s physical development and clothing should not be used to justify any act of sexual abuse (Martinez 2017). Further, there can be no excuse for sexual exploitation and abuse of students. Instead, a focus is needed on changing boys’ and girls’ attitudes toward the sexualization of the girls’ bodies. Changing such attitudes in children, which result from the adults in their lives and wider society, are difficult but deliberate effort can lead to positive results.

Targets of sexual harassment often know their harassers, and the victims, especially boys, are not always comfortable about discussing it with someone who can act

SRGBV isn't always a surprise or committed by a stranger. Rather, the harasser may be a part of the school community and is usually known to the victim. Roughly one-fifth of the students—19 percent of the boys and 22 percent of the girls—agreed on this. Sexual harassment initiated by students is most common, but it can also be perpetrated by teachers and other school employees, and the victim can be either a student or a teacher. The research found that students had been abused by schoolmates as well as by family members and neighbors.

Among those students who were harassed away from school (54 percent), the harasser tended to be a neighbor or family member. Conversely, those harassed at school (46 percent) were harassed by either schoolmates or persons in authority. Whether it occurs at school or not, sexual harassment harms children in innumerable ways. At school, however, it can particularly impair students' educational attainment (Witkowska 2005) resulting in learning loss and deleterious psychological effects. Further, sexual harassment anywhere is a target against the vulnerable and cannot be condoned.

Comparing the responses between genders, more boys (35 percent) than girls (31 percent) indicated that they kept the matter of sexual harassment to themselves. This is understandable because, within the Jamaican context, males in general tend to keep silent about issues of sexual harassment as men have more difficulties convincing law enforcement that they have been molested by a female (Peters et al. 2012). Boys were also more likely than girls to say they would change their school routines to avoid the harasser and were even more likely to take no further action to address sexual harassment. Girls, on the other hand, were more likely to say they would confront the harasser and discuss the matter with family, friends, a teacher, fellow students, or a counselor. This response is neither surprising nor a departure from the literature, because girls in general are more likely to discuss matters of sexual harassment and exploitation. And although both women and men from all walks of life experience sexual harassment at work, women file significantly more sexual

harassment charges than men, and women are disproportionately likely to report sexual harassment in male-dominated Industries (CAP Women's Initiative 2018).

SRGBV occurs across the school compound and at times when supervision is at its lowest

SRGBV occurs in many areas across the school compound, and at times when supervision is at its lowest. The survey found that sexual harassment most often happens during recess (33 percent) but also during assembly periods (8 percent), sports activities (8 percent), staff meetings (8 percent), school club meetings (8 percent), and after school hours (25 percent). Of those surveyed, 10 percent gave no response. These are important findings because the periods cited are times when students have opportunities to refresh themselves or to engage in informal, unsupervised activities such as play and interaction with their peers. Similarly, during these periods, teachers are provided with the opportunity to refresh themselves or attend to other administrative activities related to the teaching-learning process.

Further, sexual harassment usually occurs in secluded places such as toilets (34 percent), behind the school (14 percent), in fields or bush areas (9 percent), in uncompleted buildings (8 percent), and in empty classrooms (4 percent). Almost one-third of the students (31 percent) gave no response to this question. These findings agree with Mejuini et al. 2012 findings relating to school premises as an environment where students experienced sexual abuse.

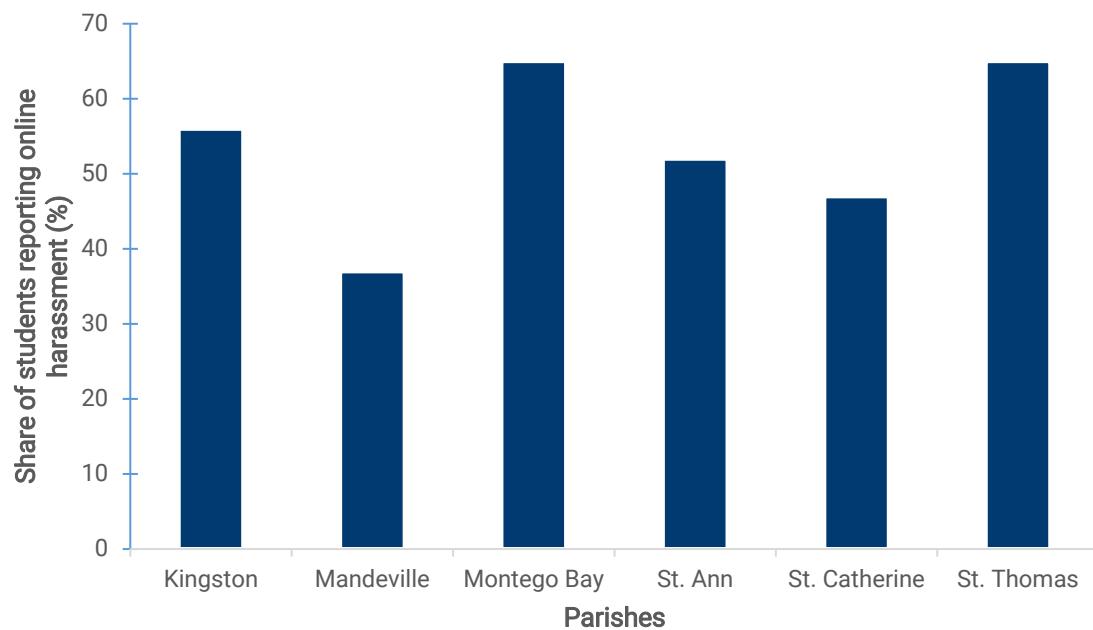
An awareness of the times and places on the school compound that increase students' vulnerability is important to all stakeholders concerned. Individual institutions could stage frequent awareness messages at general devotion over the intercom and place posters in places such as bathrooms, play area, and classrooms with information for reporting incidences. Implementing some form of buddy system among students and teachers would also help to ensure greater surveillance of each person. Phone numbers printed in bathroom stalls, posters illustrating the process of reporting antisocial behavior, and posters illustrating nonexplicitly what SRGBV looks like or materials that help students realize that SRGBV is abnormal and that victims have the right to recourse are other ideas that may be implemented. Further, as

schools become more technology oriented, the installation of a surveillance system in the principal's office and at security posts would be recommended.

SRGBV also invades the online spaces that students increasingly inhabit

With the advances in technology, a new geography of SRGBV has also emerged. Participants in the study reported experiencing SRGBV through technology at an alarming rate—and more often through social media (53.6 percent) than through any other type or place of GBV experienced on school grounds / campus (34.2 percent). Within Jamaica, the spread across educational regions suggests that there is no distinction between rural and urban communities in this regard, as all are susceptible regardless of location (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Share of students reporting online sexual harassment in Jamaican primary schools, by region or parish



Source: Source: Author's computation from field survey, 2020.

Note: The sample included 515 primary school students, aged 10–16 years, from 16 primary schools; 3% of the sample had students from 13–16 years old.

Regarding these data, in both Montego Bay and St. Thomas, 65 percent of the student respondents indicated they have been targets of sexual harassment online via social media. Although these are both urban areas, Montego Bay is more urbanized than St. Thomas. In Mandeville, a lower share of respondents reported being a target

of GBV via social media (37 percent). One would expect that Kingston—the most urbanized parish of all those surveyed—would have reported the highest rate of online harassment, but 57 percent of the Kingston respondents agreed that students have targeted for sexual harassment on social media.

It could be assumed that the level of technology literacy in the regions or parishes may influence the use and abuse of technology in perpetuating GBV, but further study on this matter is required before generalizing in any way about why a particular geography would show a propensity to abuse of technology to perpetuate GBV. This finding is, however, a significant area for further study even—or perhaps especially—amid the COVID-19 pandemic, when more technological devices are being placed in the hands of students and teachers to facilitate teaching and learning. Not to mention that online sexual harassment impairs students' academic performance as surely as in-person harassment (Kamaku and Mberia 2014).

It is against this background that a recent UNICEF report warns of online sexual exploitation of children at this time. The more time students spend online, it states, the more likely they could encounter online predators who would possibly groom them for sexual exploitation. In addition, “with more adults isolated at home, there may also be additional demand for child sexual abuse material, leading to more commercial sexual exploitation of children” (UNICEF 2020, 1).

FINDINGS ON SRGBV RESPONSE MECHANISMS

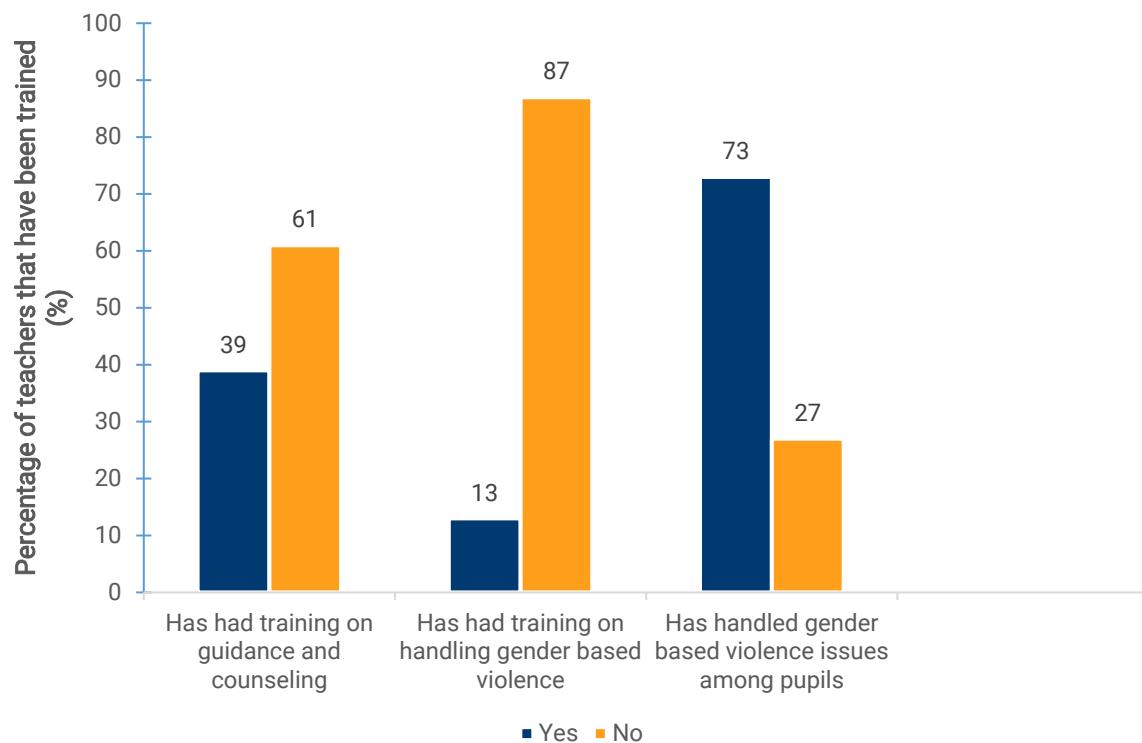
Although some level of communication is taking place, too many people remain silent about sexual harassment and should be provided with the environment to speak with someone in confidence about these issues. There is too much silence around violence, and not enough action taken by critical stakeholders (Wamue-Ngare, 2013). Preadolescence is an important age to begin sensitizing students to anti-GBV interventions—all the more because the students’ responses also indicate that older children are increasingly targeted and are less confident than younger children in their school’s ability to do something to stop sexual harassment and because initiatives to manage SRGBV have been quite limited in schools.

Less than 50 percent of respondents who reported being sexually harassed indicated being referred to a child protection worker, a police victim support unit, or a health facility. This may suggest that many victims are not accessing support services already in place to address their needs.

The data point to another matter regarding critical stakeholders’ capacity to support students affected by SRGBV: Educators at the primary level may be ill-equipped to handle SRGBV

Among the educators surveyed, approximately 39 percent have had training in guidance and counseling, but only 13 percent have had training in handling GBV, although 73 percent have had to handle GBV issues among pupils (Figure 3). There is a need to leverage the capacity of teachers to enhance SRGBV response in primary schools, although this may be a complex matter.

Figure 3. Share of primary school educators trained in guidance and counseling and handling of gender-based violence among pupils



Source: Author's computation from field survey, 2020.

Note: The sample included some 100 educators from 16 primary schools.

Guidance published by the United Kingdom's Department for Education states that reports of sexual violence and sexual harassment are extremely complex to manage (UK DFE 2018). However, the department also underscored the need for victims to be protected, to be offered appropriate support, and to receive every effort to ensure their educations are not disrupted. In addition, other children and staff need support and protection as appropriate.

Although this study does not aim to assess the effectiveness of current interventions to manage GBV in primary schools, it does highlight some of the mechanisms already in place to minimize it. Perhaps a future study could assess the effectiveness of these programs or interventions.

Current interventions may help to reduce SRGBV in Jamaican primary schools, but more measures are needed

In its quest to address conflict, Jamaica's Ministry of Education, Youth and Information implemented the Safe School Programme, the Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) curriculum, and the School-Wide Positive Behaviour Intervention and Support (SWPBIS) framework—which collectively may have contributed to the low prevalence of primary-level SRGBV revealed in the study. However, purposeful evaluation of these programs would be necessary before reaching any overall conclusion about their effectiveness in reducing SRGBV.

Safe Schools Programme (SSP)

The Safe Schools Programme (SSP) is a joint initiative of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of National Security, and the JCF. The SSP includes the creation of school safety zones and the deployment of police personnel as school resource officers (SROs) to extremely volatile schools to assist with the management of discipline.

Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) Curriculum (Safety and Security Module)

The HFLE curriculum, which has been institutionalized in schools, aims to equip students, especially teenage boys, with the requisite life skills for building resilience and to empower them to make healthy, informed choices. The curriculum promotes respect for the roles played by men and women in society. This could reduce the susceptibility of males to gangs and their overall vulnerability to a life of crime.

To achieve greater visibility at the primary level, an HFLE subject-matter specialist should be employed in all primary-level institutions, just as at the secondary level, to ensure coverage of critical areas such as GBV. More often than ever, this subject matter becomes the responsibility of the guidance counselor, who is not necessarily a specialist in this area. In primary schools lacking guidance counselors, the subject matter is delivered by the class teacher and is integrated into other subject matter.

School-Wide Positive Behaviour Intervention and Support (SWPBIS) Framework

The SWPBIS framework organizes behavioral interventions into three tiers, determined by the severity and frequency of disruptive behaviors. SWPBIS is unique because it deemphasizes punishment, focusing instead on promoting responsibility through wholesome, positive, empowering, and enabling language and approaches. This framework has the potential to decrease or even eliminate SRGBV experiences.

Based on the findings from the study, students indicated that adults intervene in cases of bullying and expressed the view that greater supervision is required at school and that there should be specific rules against bullying and strategies in place to help students work out their issues (Ohsako, 1997). This is what the SWPBIS is geared toward achieving. Notwithstanding, the finding that some students refuse to report incidents of violence against them may be as a result of confidentiality issues and protection for the perpetrator, bearing in mind that many respondents indicated being abused by a person of authority. Greater supervision and confidentiality mechanisms to protect victims and to stem GBV in schools are required.

In addition, UNICEF's / Jamaica's Child-Friendly Initiative, which all schools should adopt, teaches students and adults how to be kind and caring to others.

The data from this study show that the most dominant measures to manage the challenges and minimizing SRGBV in Jamaican primary schools are psychosocial counseling and support (37 percent) provided to the victims and justice measures (50 percent) taken against the perpetrator. In addition, the respondents indicated that erecting perimeter fences across the schools; sensitizing students to cases of SRGBV; incorporating this security-related subject into schools' extracurricular activities and early morning assembly charge; and further separating the male and female bathrooms would add extra value in minimizing GBV in primary schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research is a preliminary attempt to examine SRGBV in Jamaican primary schools. As such, the time required to interrogate the subject matter to the full extent was limited. Moreover, the data limitations create further challenges to drawing overarching conclusions. Notwithstanding, some recommendations can be made in keeping with the preliminary findings, as described below.

National-level recommendations

- 1. Commit to executing a more robust study to capture the essence of GBV at the primary-school level and to further dissect the key messages of this study.**

A more robust study would embrace a larger sample of students and teachers, while also interrogating more variables pertinent to the subject of GBV.

- 2. Institute a general sensitization campaign for primary-level students regarding the responsible use of technology, particularly social media.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought on an accelerated mode of delivering education throughout the education sector in Jamaica because schools have had to close their doors and embrace online learning, for the most part. This means that an electronic device is a must for all students, irrespective of education level.

The research showing that technology has emerged as a new geography for SRGBV immediately has educators and policy makers thinking about control mechanisms to ensure the safety of these devices and about appropriate online platforms to ensure technology integration and responsible use on the part of students. Further, the requisite mechanisms must be implemented to ward off intruders from the spaces of learning for our children.

In addition, to ensure children's safety, a general sensitization initiative regarding responsible use of technological media must be embarked upon in earnest. This requires a nationwide or communitywide partnership to include support from parents, school, and community personnel. Students must also be sensitized regarding the

responsible use of the internet and the implications of irresponsible use. Further, the devices provided to children must contain the requisite security features to ward off intruders.

3. Provide specialist teachers to deliver the HFLE curriculum at the primary level and provide all primary-level institutions with access to guidance and counseling support.

Consideration should be given to assigning HFLE teachers to become a part of primary-level establishments, as obtained in secondary-level institutions, to guarantee that students are exposed to the requisite content at this level of the education system. Providing students with greater guidance and counseling support will also necessarily complement the HFLE component of the curriculum.

The HFLE curriculum aims to equip students with requisite life skills and empowering them to make healthy and informed choices that prepare them for their respective roles in society. A greater focus must be given to the full implementation of the curriculum, especially at the primary level, to address some of the preadolescence issues brought out in the study: the sexualized views of girls going through puberty, the perception that girls' clothing causes sexual violence, and the targeting of girls for sexual harassment because of their physical development during pre-puberty.

Greater concentration on the delivery of the HFLE curriculum could also reduce the susceptibility of males to gangs and their overall vulnerability to a life of maladaptive behavior, which is being manifested early in the form of bullying, as recorded in the study.

School-level recommendations

General recommendations targeting institutions and gatekeepers in and around the school community will be necessary to combat SRGBV and keep it at ground zero (UNESCO, 2016). Stemming from the findings of the study, the following are also proposed:

1. Sensitize critical stakeholders and forge greater partnerships at the school level for the management of SRGBV.

Sensitization of critical stakeholders—including principals, class teachers, school governance structures, guidance counselors, and HFLE teachers—regarding the findings of the study and providing supporting structures to assist with the prevention, detection, and treatment of SRGBV in their institutions must be treated as a priority.

Each school should institute school bylaws that implement the standards and interventions against GBV through effective engagement of teachers, parents, and students in regular meetings, school clubs, and agreements by student leaders to fight GBV. Involving key stakeholders in reporting and addressing GBV—for example, the police, head teachers, parents, and school governance structures (such as parent engagement groups, parent–teacher associations, and student leaders) and community leaders—can only be a win–win for all our children. In–service teacher training and systems to report and raise awareness about GBV must also become a part of the intervention structure.

In addition, the system must ensure safety features at schools, including fencing around the school perimeter, careful coverage and surveillance of both open–ground and enclosed spaces, equitable and safe use of school amenities, mapping the areas prone to GBV, and effective monitoring mechanisms.

2. Inspire confidence in GBV reporting mechanisms at the school level.

The findings suggest that sexual harassment is often committed by someone known to the victims, but the victims, especially boys, are not always comfortable about discussing the matter with someone who may be able to take the requisite action. To mitigate against this situation and return some level of confidence to persons who would want to report and expose perpetrators, school administrators must implement reporting mechanisms at the school level that can inspire students’ confidence in reporting any act of GBV committed against them or their peers (Onaja, 2019).

Further, installing a buddy system where each person takes responsibility for the other’s safety may also lessen harassment because the perpetrator may eventually understand the level of non-tolerance to certain antisocial behavior in and around the school premises and cease such action.

Ensuring greater stakeholder participation in school life may also help adults to feel more comfortable about apprising school administrators of incidents happening outside of the school system, hence enabling speedy reporting to the requisite authorities for greater action and support. With such systems in place, the perpetrators will understand that there is no safe haven for them in such an environment and may deter any thought or action toward GBV.

Distrust, fear of retaliation from the perpetrator, and fear of being stigmatized or further victimized may be some of the causes for the reluctance to report GBV. However, providing a safe haven and instilling confidence in the school system to ensure a culture of non-tolerance for GBV and creating the environment to enable students' confidence in reporting any matter of SRGBV among them, without fear of being targeted unfairly or singled out in a crowd, is essential for curtailing harassment among our children.

Student, teacher, and community-level recommendations

In addition, several specific recommendations for action at the student, teacher, and community levels would promote effectiveness in further reducing SRGBV:

1. Empower students through capacity building to combat GBV.

- Educate and inspire children to be assertive
- Make available GBV-specific guidance and counseling sessions for students
- Build capacity for boys and girls—and especially student leaders—to enable them to become instruments of change concerning GBV
- Develop a code of conduct for teachers and students that stiffens the punishments for perpetrators of SRGBV
- Form safe spaces and “Say No to SRGBV” clubs headed by pupils as ambassadors

- Ensure that policy provisions are in place to address GBV as early as preadolescence or prepubescence

2. Parental empowerment is integral to the fight against GBV.

- Engage parents in understanding the psychosocial needs of their children
- Encourage and educate parents to assume a social support role for children, especially for those in their own family

3. Forging partnerships with communities is essential to combating GBV.

- Effectively implement child-friendly centers in neighborhoods and communities, because most cases of GBV have a genesis in there
- Effectively implement child-friendly safety standards in all schools

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that primary-level students are exposed to GBV and that boys and girls are equally susceptible, although girls are the most targeted. Although the prevalence of GBV among primary-level students is relatively low, the requisite intervention required to reduce aspects of SRGBV must be implemented with a sense of purpose to keep the numbers low or eradicated totally.

The unexpected finding regarding the use of technology to perpetuate SGBV will necessarily be a critical area of focus at this time. This finding has implications for the future of teaching and learning, even amid the COVID-19 pandemic, when technology has become a major platform for driving the teaching-learning process because of the limited physical space to accommodate students in keeping with the social-distancing agenda. The Jamaican education system will necessarily need to be purposeful about any intervention implemented to ensure the responsible use of technology to enhance the teaching-learning process and facilitate the type of critical thinking and innovative skills for our children to advance in their educational development. Any misuse of or deviation from this agenda would be defeating the intended purpose. Greater surveillance of common areas of the school compound is also necessary.

Jamaica is not short of strategies in combating SRGBV, but these strategies must be given agency to benefit the requisite target group and to enable a safer, more peaceful coexistence among all our children. Instituting a rigorous reporting mechanism and inspiring confidence in persons who will necessarily want to report will send the strong message of non-tolerance of GBV at all levels.

Further, the requisite response mechanism for managing SRGBV must be strengthened by ensuring that guidance and counseling support services are provided to all primary-level institutions and supported by HFLE teachers capable of delivering the technical aspect of the HFLE curriculum. Creating a general awareness regarding the potential effect of GBV and the responses that are required at this time can only augur well for the education system and, by extension, for the country at large. Where the education system refuses to act, the cost of inaction can be deleterious to the effective development of our children, our future generation (Onaja, 2019).

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